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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BASRAH 000046

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: SAYYID AL-SHUHADAH LEADER ON POST-CHARGE OF THE KNIGHTS
SECURITY SITUATION, PROVINCIAL COUNCIL ELECTIONS, AND DETENTION OF
RASHID AL-SARRAJI

REF: A) BASRAH 044 AND PREVIOUS; (B) BASRAH 040; (C) BASRAH 037

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CLASSIFIED BY: Howell Howard, Director, Regional Embassy Office
Basrah, Dept. of State.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (S) SUMMARY: In a May 21 meeting with the REO, Sayyid al-Shuhadah (SAS) leader and Council of Representatives (COR) member Dagher al-Musawi stated that the security situation is much improved after Operation Charge of the Knights (Cok), but cautioned that the slow pace of reconstruction was beginning to frustrate many people. Concerning the upcoming provincial elections, Musawi indicated that the Provincial Elections Law would probably be passed in mid-June, and expressed confidence that the upcoming elections will proceed smoothly in Basrah, especially given the improved security environment. Though acknowledging the growing interest in independent parties and candidates, Musawi expressed confidence that the more-established political blocs would fare well in the upcoming provincial elections. He said his party would run under the banner of the coalition Shaheed al-Merhab, which will also include ISCI, Badr, Hizbollah, and the Shaheed al-Merhab Cultural Party. Although Musawi appeared reserved and detached throughout the meeting, he continued to express considerable interest in the fate of Rashid Majid Muhammed al-Sarraji, the detained editor of the SAS-owned newspaper, al-Fatah. End Summary.

BASRAH AFTER COK

¶2. (C) During a meeting held May 21 at the Basrah Regional Embassy Office, SAS leader Musawi shared his impressions of the much-improved security situation in Basrah after the GOI's operation Charge of the Knights (COK)(Ref A). Mentioning that the previous evening he had seen people walking around Basrah late at night, he said that this would not have been possible in the past. Basrah was a much calmer and safer place, and the people were enjoying their new freedom. Responding to the REO's concern about reports of continued weapons smuggling along the Iranian border, Musawi, without a hint of emotion, denounced these activities, stating that the Iraqi people need development, not weapons and violence. Condemning the attacks and the harm that they have caused, he strongly disavowed all of the weapons that have been given to outlaws and militias. Musawi sidestepped REO Director's note that many weapons found during COK that had recent Iranian origin markings, saying that since COK weapons smuggling was not as big of an issue as it had been.

¶3. (C) Musawi was somewhat critical of the efforts of acting Minister of Justice Safa al-Safi, who was directed by the PM to

oversee the distribution of \$100 million in emergency reconstruction funds (Ref B). Hinting that the acting Minister of Justice was not the most qualified person for this task, Musawi argued that the Minister of Municipalities was better suited to oversee the distribution of emergency funds (Note: The Minister of Municipalities is Riyadh Ghurayyib of the Badr Party, one of SAS's partners in the ISCI coalition). Musawi indicated that people are frustrated with the slow pace of reconstruction activities in Basrah and expected more from the government. (Note: al-Safi has yet to produce a list of projects that he and his Committee of Deputy Ministers will execute in Basrah. End Note.)

PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS

¶4. (C) When asked about the progress of the Provincial Election Law in the COR, Musawi, a COR member, appeared disinterested, stating that the law remains under discussion and that "many committees have been formed" to review it. He added that he believes the law was almost ready, and that it would probably be passed in mid-June. Then, it will be up to the Independent High Election Committee (IHEC) to implement it. Sharing his opinion of Hazim al-Juda, the Elections Coordinator for Basrah, Musawi stated that he is independent and neutral, and that if the security situation remains calm, he will not encounter any problems. (Note: While many contacts share a positive opinion of al-Juda, most assert a connection to Badr and some question how independent he will be if pressured by Iran/Badr/SAS. End Note.)

¶5. (C) Musawi reiterated that if the security situation remains stable, the elections will proceed smoothly; he did express concern about the increasing number of criminals arrested during the COK operation who have been released, warning that they could disrupt the elections. At the same time, he did not seem worried that those who fled to Iran after COK would return to Basrah, stating that they "are not a problem as long as the border remains secure," and that the GOI can work with its

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neighbors to ensure border security during the elections.

¶6. (C) Musawi expressed confidence that the established political parties will fare well in the upcoming elections, though he believes that Fadhilah and the Sadrists will falter given their poor performance and reputation. Acknowledging that independent parties and candidates have a chance in the election, he said that their lack of qualified, experienced candidates will ultimately hurt their cause. Musawi also revealed that SAS will run under the banner of Shaheed al-Mehrab, a coalition that will also include ISCI, Badr, Hizbollah, and the Shaheed al-Mehrab Cultural Party. Though he expects some interference from Iraq's neighbors, he did not appear overly concerned.

SARRAJI'S CONTINUED DETENTION

¶7. (S) Musawi expressed considerable interest in the fate of Rashid Majid Muhammed al-Sarraji, the detained editor of the SAS newspaper, al-Fatah. Musawi asserted that, despite al-Sarraji's acknowledged anti-Coalition rhetoric, he thought Iraq's constitution guaranteed a free press and that journalists were free to report the news. Musawi questioned the validity of REO Director's claims that Sarraji is alleged to have ties with the IRGC-QF. When the REO director asserted that the main evidence was a set of checks showing al-Sarraji as payee from entities connected to IRGC, Musawi retorted that there was no bank in Basrah that would cash such checks. Musawi pledged that if al-Sarraji were released, Musawi would guarantee that al-Sarraji would never again publish anti-Coalition material. He emphasized that to date SAS has not called for the withdrawal of Coalition Forces, despite troubling incidents such as Abu Ghraib, Blackwater, and the recent shooting of the Quran.

¶8. (S) COMMENT: Daghir al-Musawi continues to affect an articulate and reasonably cordial manner with the REO. At the end of our last meeting (Ref C), Musawi told our interpreter

that he would not meet with us again as we had no information on al-Sarraji's fate. On this occasion he seemed to appreciate a forum to express SAS views on al-Saffaji's detention. REO recommends continuing to meet with Musawi for the time being. His words on the election were useful, and ties in with other contacts' observations that ISCI/Badr/SAS will paint independents as politically inexperienced unless they have been brought into their fold.

HOWARD